

International tourism and COVID-19: post-pandemic recovery strategies

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Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic has deeply affected the tourism and travel sector. Now, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is already clear now that its economic impact would be more severe than in the case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2003. Although not as deadly as SARS, coronavirus infection has a longer incubation period and leaves about 85% of the infected without any (or with just mild) symptoms which makes it more difficult to track and to contain. Moreover, it appears to be much more contagious than its predecessor. New mutations of the coronavirus are appearing now and then making doctors and the general public nervous. The good news is that most people recover from the disease and develop antibodies that can protect them from getting infected again (natural vaccination). In addition, several vaccines are now available and the vaccination is going full speed all around the world. Those vaccinated and cured might become the key element for the post-virus recovery strategies of tourism organisations. People who were vaccinated against COVID-19 or with an acquired immunity to the virus would be capable of travelling freely without spreading the disease. Airlines, hotels and gastronomy should aim at this group offering them discounts and special offers. However, the problem is how to effectively ensure that everyone who claims to be vaccinated or cured from COVID-19 is telling the truth. Health tracking bracelets, apps, and other advanced technological solutions should be put in place. Some best practices from Hong Kong, mainland China, or Russia can be used as the examples to follow.

Keywords: international tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, post-viral tourism, recovery strategies

1. Introduction

In general, human history is riddled with infectious diseases that left thousands of millions of people dead. The Great Plague, “sleeping sickness” (known as “*encefalitis letargica*”), or the Spanish Flu are some well-known examples. It has to be acknowledged that coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is not the first one in the 21st century. The first one was the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that started in 2002 and infected 8000 people causing 774 deaths in 26 countries (Wilder-Smith, 2006).

In general, viral diseases prove to be more dangerous and unpredictable than those caused by the bacteria. Typically, viruses are inert and harmless in isolation but when put in action they react and multiply quickly. There are five thousand types of viruses that are known to science: from flu and cold to smallpox, Ebola, polio and HIV/AIDS. They prove to be very dangerous human killers: smallpox alone killed 300 million people on Earth in the 20th century. The worst epidemic in history was the “Great Swine Flu” or the “Spanish flu”: while WWI killed 21 million people in 4 years, the Spanish flu did the same in 4 months (Oxford et al., 2002).

The good news is that thanks to the science and progress we have better healthcare and understanding of how to prevent and cure infectious diseases. Several weeks after the outbreak of

the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that causes COVID-19 scientists could identify the virus and sequence its genome (Sah et al., 2020). In spite of that, casualties will rise: according to the World Health Organization, the data so far indicate that the crude mortality ratio (the number of reported deaths divided by the reported cases) is between 3 and 4% (see WHO, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to predict that the impact of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry is going to be devastating similar (but with much higher magnitude) to what happened in the case of SARS (see e.g. Pine and McKercher, 2004). According to some preliminary estimates, global airlines might lose around \$113 billion in sales (Riley, 2020). Tourism organisations (private, public, and NGO) worldwide will suffer. Sharing economy in tourism has also suffered. Airbnb and Uber had to dramatically reduce their activities.

However, everything is not as grim as it appears. The numbers of people who will receive their vaccination jab or who will recover from the COVID-19 infection are going to rise quickly and these people would constitute the first travellers and clients of tourism and hospitality industries in the post-viral world.

2. COVID-19 pandemic and tourism

The coronavirus COVID-19 means bad news for international travel and tourism (Strielkowski, 2020). About 85% of infected people have mild or no symptoms of the infection and the incubation period might take about two weeks. This makes COVID-19 more dangerous than the regular flu because younger people or healthy individuals without symptoms can transmit the coronavirus infection to the elderly and weakened people for whom the coronavirus might turn out to be deadly.

After the COVID-19 outbreak in China in December 2019, the epicentre of the pandemic has moved to Europe having a devastating impact on such popular tourist destination as Italy, Spain, and France, and then to the United States and the rest of the world. Without any reliable 100% cure, the COVID-19 is treated with antimalarial drugs and even the medicine designed to fight the Ebola virus. The vaccines have been already developed and are now available on the market. Several countries such as Israel, United Kingdom, or the Russian Federation are offering free vaccine to its citizens and have managed to vaccinate millions of them already.

In addition, the numbers of newly recovered people are also growing. These people have the immunity against the coronavirus and are unlikely to contract it again (Bacon, 2020), even though there are reports of people contracting COVID-19 for the second time in a row (see e.g. Leussink and Swift, 2020). Moreover, many scientists believe that blood serum might be made from the cured individuals to help the infected ones (see Rogers, 2020) which supports the theory of getting immunity to COVID-19 after surviving the infection.

3. Smart quarantine and tracing

One and the only effective recovery strategies for tourism organisations in the post-viral world needs to be allowing the people with vaccination against the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus to travel freely. Airlines, hotels, and spas should be the first to offer them various discounts and packages. It might be that a small percentage of the cured individuals would require rehabilitation meaning that there might be some special offers for those groups of travellers.

However, one important issue would remain: how to tell the vaccinated and cured ones from those posing as being such? Some criminals or opportunists would surely attempt to cheat in order to be included in this first cohort of post-viral coronavirus-free tourists. Here, the technology might help like it is already helping with fighting the coronavirus. In Prague, one of the first patients infected with COVID-19 in the beginning of March 2020 were two Uber drivers, both in very difficult condition. However, thanks to the Uber app, all their recent rides could be discovered, and all their passengers could be traced and tested for coronavirus.

Smart quarantine and tracing are already used in many countries to contain the spread of COVID-19. Figure 1 that follows shows Hong Kong's quarantine tracking bracelet that is being

administered to all new arriving travellers. Paired with a smartphone app, it monitors the quarantined person's whereabouts and reports the violations to authorities.



Figure 1. Hong Kong's quarantine tracking bracelet
Source: Leung (2020)

In China, the tracing technology was inserted into the popular payment apps Alipay and WeChat Pay. Figure 2 that follows shows how colour coding is used in Alipay app to determine the person's health status.



Figure 2. China's QR health code system based on Alipay
Source: Ye (2020)

The code in the Alipay app can be either green (meaning that the person is risk-free), yellow (meaning that there might be a danger of mild exposure and risk sometimes requiring a one-week self-quarantine), or red (manifesting immediate exposure and leading to the immediate two-week

quarantine). Using this system, China have effectively battled the spread of the coronavirus infection and reached an impressive reduction of COVID-19 cases in terms of weeks.

In some countries where the novel technological solutions might prove to be too costly or administratively difficult, cheaper health tracing options might be used. Text messages with codes allowing to leave one's home or QR codes that can be used to trace one's presence in a certain location can be applied (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. QR code for registering restaurant guests in Moscow, Russian Federation
Source: Voronin (2020)

All in all, smart quarantine tools might be used to mark healthy and risk-free travellers. These technological solutions would help to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus COVID-19 before the effective vaccine is discovered without compromising international tourism and travel.

4. Concluding remarks

All in all, there is little doubt that the world is going to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic like it always did. Nevertheless, this is the first time we see the global pandemic of such unprecedented scale broadcasted in real time. The numbers of the infected and deceased are reported to us every minute making us to feel endangered and vulnerable. However, the information and communication technologies that help us to be constantly online and to follow the spread of the pandemic, might also help us to effectively halt its advancement.

Moreover, one should not forget that the COVID-19 is not the Black Death Plague. Most people would never contract the coronavirus at all and of those who would, the majority would feel fine and recover from it quickly. These people would become the first virus-free travellers that would help to breath the new life into the tourism and service industries once that the dust settles.

In the past year, we have learnt that border closures and strict lockdowns do not constitute a viable solution of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in the long run. The economic downfall might be much worse than all adverse effects of the coronavirus infection. Serious economic recessions are likely to follow and the world economies are going to suffer. However, globalisation and technological revolution have already provided us with many useful tools that should now be effectively deployed to pave the way to the post-viral tourism and travel. Efforts need to be made by the governments and politicians to promote these tools and the technology-based solutions and to make the people to trust them and to use them on a wide scale.

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